## Chapter 9 - Latino Images and Audiences to 1960

*Laura Isabel Serna (University of Southern California)*

Chicano poet Tino Villanueva begins his book length poem, *Scene from the Movie Giant* like this: “What I have from 1956 is one instant at the Holiday/theater, where a small dimension of a film, as in/a dream, became the feature of the whole.” (1) The “small dimension of a film” he is referring to in this line is a scene at the end of the 1956 film *Giant.* That film, which starred famous Hollywood stars Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, and James Dean, is an epic western that tells the story of a wealthy Texas family and the changes they face as cattle ranchers confront the new wealth generated by the discovery of oil. Toward the end of the film the family stops at a diner. There the racist owner insults the family’s Mexican American daughter-in-law and grandson and refuses to serve a Mexican family. This causes a violent confrontation between the family patriarch and the diner’s owner. In the film this sequence represents the beginning of a new chapter for the now racially mixed family, but the scene of anti-Mexican racism stayed in Villanueva’s mind, stirring up feelings of exclusion from on-screen representation.

Villanueva’s poem sums up the predicament that many Latino audience members found themselves in during the first half of the twentieth century. They were hungry for images of themselves on screen but frequently found that those images represented Latinos stereotypically, rarely allowed them to be the main characters, or protagonists, and often framed their very existence as a social problem that needed to be solved. This chapter surveys how representations of Latinos shifted over time between the introduction of cinema in the late 19th century and the 1950s and how Latino viewers responded to those representations.

The first Latinos (as we might use that term today) to appear on screen were two members of the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show, a traveling live show that recreated scenes audiences associated with the western United States. Pedro Esquivel and Dionicio Gonzalez, performed their act, *The Mexican Knife Duel* (1894), in front of Thomas Edison’s early film camera. This film, which was likely between thirty and sixty seconds long, would likely have confirmed what audiences had already learned about Mexicans through other forms of popular culture such as dime novels, political cartoons, and plays: Mexicans were violent, unsophisticated, and cruel. This early film established the norms that would govern the depiction of Latino characters, with slight variations, through the late 1920s. The majority of the over 100 films that were set in Mexico, or the US-Mexico borderlands made before 1930 portrayed Mexican or other Latino characters in ways that conformed to what scholar Charles Ramirez Berg identifies as six basic **stereotypes**, widely held but simplified images of a person or group, “the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady.” (66)

Early silent films, usually about fifteen minutes long (the length of one-reel of film) depicted Mexicans, male or female, as untrustworthy if not criminal. A **film** **cycle** (a group of films made around the same time that share thematic concerns) of **“greaser” films** made between 1908-1914 exemplify how Mexican characters were portrayed as “a sexual threat to the European American home and public sphere.” (Noriega 5) An instructive example is the **single reel** film *Broncho Billy and the Greaser* (dir. Gilbert M. Anderson, 1914), which tells the story of a “half-breed” or mixed-race character, the greaser of the title, who harasses a white woman in the post office where the mail is being delivered by Broncho Billy (the cowboy character developed by Gilbert M. Anderson). After Billy defends the woman, the “Half-breed” plots revenge, a plan that is foiled by the girl who brings help in the nick of time. This short film conforms to a narrative structure that positioned Anglo-Americans as heroic defenders of their communities and families against racially inferior individuals or groups.

<Fig. 9.1 here> *A production still from* Broncho Billy and the Greaser*, published in Motography, October 3, 1914, 754.*

In 1910, at the height of the greaser films’ popularity, the Mexican Revolution, a civil conflict between various factions that sought to end the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, erupted. Many residents of the US were deeply interested in this conflict that was taking place just across the southern border, in part because many wealthy Americans had extensive financial investments in agriculture and mining. US film studios capitalized on this fascination by highlighting the revolution in **newsreels** (weekly compilations of footage of current events) and creating fiction films that made the revolution part of their story line or included characters who resembled the conflict’s most visible protagonists. Perhaps most often mentioned of the numerous films that made the revolution a central theme, was the now lost film *The Life of General Villa* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1914) that combined a fictional account of Villa’s life, including an ending in which he becomes the president of Mexico, with documentary-type footage of soldiers and battles. This film was part of a contract between Villa and the Mutual Film co. that exchanged media access to Villa and his troops for a percentage of any profits. While by all accounts this portrayal of Villa was sympathetic—the United States momentarily supported his movement—the line between revolutionary and bandit was blurry. Most of these films perpetuated the image of Mexico as a chaotic, barbarous land and Mexicans as incapable of organizing and running their own government.

In the mid-teens, the US film industry moved westward from its early base on the east coast. The history of the industry’s new home as first Spanish and then Mexican territory became the backdrop for numerous feature films with titles such as *Mission Bells: A Romance of San Juan Capistrano* (Kinemacolor Co. of America, 1913); *Rose of the Rancho* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1914); and *A Yoke of Gold* or *In the Days of the Missions* (Lloyd B. Carleton, 1916). These films offered a romantic vision of California’s past, representing life in “Old California” as colorful, decadent, and exotic. One prominent and extensively studied example of films that romanticized life in California under Spanish and then Mexican rule is *Ramona* a 1910 film by D.W. Griffith. Based on a novel of the same title by Helen Hunt Jackson, the film tells the story of an orphaned girl, the Ramona of the title played by the popular actress Mary Pickford, who is taken in by the wealthy ***hispano*** (a person descended from Spanish settlers in the Southwest before it became part of the United States) owners of a ranch. There she meets and falls in love with an indigenous laborer named Alessandro who the mistress of the ranch sends him away to thwart their romance. When she tells Ramona she also has indigenous heritage, the girl flees to be with Alessandro. The couple are unable to find peace as white settlers drive them away from the places they try to settle. Ultimately Alessandro dies and Ramona is rescued by the son of the rancho family, Felipe, who is also in love with her. While Hunt Jackson wrote the novel as a means of drawing attention to the mistreatment of Indians in the United States, many readers were captivated by her description of the novel’s setting in California just after the Mexican-American war (1846-1848). This was an aspect of the film that audiences also found intriguing. Reviewers emphasized that the film had been shot on location at a former rancho, the costuming, and its portrayal of rancho life. So intriguing was the story that several additional film adaptations were made after Griffith’s including one in 1928 starring Mexican actress Dolores del Rio.

Throughout the 1920s the border continued to furnish a backdrop for romance and adventure. Films with titles like *Rio Grande* (Edwin Carewe, 1920); *A California Romance* (Jerome Storm, 1922); and *Border Intrigue* (J.P. McGowan, 1925) set their stories in cantinas, on ranches, and in border towns. Though these narratives sometimes portrayed Mexican characters, especially those with one white parent, sympathetically, they typically focused on white protagonists. Mexican characters played villains in the form of bandits, revolutionaries, or cattle rustlers. In broad strokes, audiences were attracted to scenes of fiestas or fandangos and vaguely Spanish costumes or the rough and tumble ambiance of the border. These films allowed audiences to visit the Spanish or Mexican past and the border region without having to think about present day discrimination against ethnic Mexican communities made up of long-time residents and new immigrants.

Ironically, film producers in the United States had worked hard to cultivate Latin American audiences and film exhibition had become a lucrative endeavor in immigrant communities across the southwestern United States. Since, for example, ethnic Mexican patrons might be excluded from motion picture theaters that served white audiences, entrepreneurs both from the community and from outside established local theaters specifically for Spanish-speaking audiences. By the mid-1920s a vibrant film culture emerged in immigrant communities. While the films they showed might not be different from those shown in other theaters these motion picture venues advertised in Spanish-language newspapers, provided meeting space for community events, and featured entertainment before or between films by community members or by performers who formed part of a Spanish-language theater and musical performance circuit. These practices created a welcoming environment that spoke to the experiences and concerns of local audiences characterized by shared experiences of immigration and language. (Serna 2014; Gunckel 2015)

Those audiences were just as fascinated by the idea of Hollywood stardom as other motion picture goers. However, when they saw themselves onscreen it was typically in stereotypical roles or as extras who appeared in the background of westerns and other films set on the border or in Latin American settings. Major roles, even of Latino or Latin American characters were frequently played by white actors in brownface makeup or simply in costumes and makeup that signaled a racialized identity. A small handful of successful Latinos in Hollywood provided immigrant communities in the United States and Latin America with stars that they felt connected to by language or national origin. Ramon Navarro and Dolores del Rio were from well-off Mexican families and though press coverage emphasized their exotic good looks they both conformed to the European beauty standards that reigned in the industry. Del Rio publicly committed herself to only playing dignified roles, while Navarro was known for supporting charitable causes in the immigrant community (Rodriguez 1997; López 1998; Chavez 2011). In fact, though she continued to be cast in Hollywood after the introduction of sound, Del Rio opted to return to Mexico in the 1940s where the thriving film industry there gave her the opportunity to play more artistically complex roles. Lupe Vélez’s short career offers a counterpoint to their star personae. She came to Hollywood from the world of theater in Mexico City and worked in both silent and sound film appearing alongside stars such as Douglas Fairbanks Jr. Her characters, especially the Mexican Spitfire character she played in a series of films in the 1940s, were volatile and hot tempered, characterizations that were supported by press coverage that referred to her as “the hot tamale” and focused on her tumultuous personal life. Although she successfully made the transition from silent to sound films, Vélez’s **star persona** (the combination of her on screen roles and the way she was represented in the press) seemed to affirm stereotypes about Latinas. (Sturtevant 2005)

<Fig. 9.2 here.> *A publicity photograph of Dolores Del Rio published in* Motion Picture Magazine*, March 1926, 18.*

In the late 1920s just as Vélez was beginning her career in Hollywood the introduction of sound technology changed the industry in significant ways. Major American studios had relied on the relative ease with which silent films could be translated for non-English speaking audiences. **Intertitles**, slides inserted at specific points in the film that conveyed narrative information or dialogue, could with a small amount of effort be translated into other languages. In fact, studios had set up foreign departments that handled the translation of intertitles and publicity material and shipped those film prints to distribution offices across the globe. Introducing sound and specifically spoken dialogue presented a challenge to this system. Initially, because setting up theaters to screen sound films required significant investments in technology, Hollywood studios continued to produce silent films for a time. But soon they began to grapple with how they were going to keep the attention of non-English speaking audiences around the globe. Films that focused on musical performances were one solution. But soon, the major studios began to experiment with making films in multiple languages.

Studios began to make the same film with different casts speaking the dialogue in different languages. Although they made films in German, French, Italian, and other languages, **Spanish-language film production** became the most extensive and the most long-lasting of these experiments. (Jarvinen 2012) One often cited example of Hollywood’s Spanish-language production and its possibilities and challenges is the 1931 Universal film *Dracula* directed by George Melford. The Spanish-language version starred Carlos Villarias and Lupita Tovar and was shot at night on the same set used by the English-language cast and even used the same costumes. Some believe that the Spanish-language version was superior to the “original.” But that was not always the case. Spanish-speaking audiences in the US and across Latin America were hopeful that these films would reflect their experiences, but they were often disappointed. These productions were made with smaller budgets and thus were often of significantly lower quality. Even more importantly, audiences had become attached to Hollywood stars and resented films full of unknown talent. Although audiences were ambivalent about Hollywood’s Spanish-language productions, their production created more opportunities for Latinos. Spanish-language production led to an influx of Spanish-speaking talent who sought work not only as performers but also as screenwriters, dialogue coaches, and consultants. Newcomers to Hollywood and those that had been working for a long time in Los Angeles’s vibrant Spanish-language theater scene jockeyed for opportunities, while producers tried to determine what regional or national dialect of Spanish was most appropriate. (Gunckel 2008)

<Fig. 9.3 here.> *A poster advertising Universal’s Spanish-language version of* Drácula *(dir. Melford; Universal, 1931) starring Carlos Villarias and Lupita Tovar in the Argentine market.*

The introduction of sound also created opportunities for film producers in Latin America. Companies sprang up in Argentina, Mexico, and Cuba eager to fill Latin American and Latino audiences’ desire for films that more accurately reflected their historical and contemporary realities. These film industries benefited from the experience of creative and technical staff who had worked in Hollywood’s Spanish language production. For example, Mexico’s first sound film *Santa* (dir. Antonio Moreno, 1931) was the second film adaptation of a late nineteenth century novel that told the story of a country girl corrupted by the city. It was directed by Spaniard Antonio Moreno who had become a major Hollywood star and featured Lupita Tovar and Donald Reed (born Ernesto Guillen). Significantly, the film made use of a sound on film technique developed by two brothers, Roberto and Joselito Rodriguez who had worked in Hollywood.

By the late-1930s the films made by increasingly stable and productive film industries in Latin America found receptive audiences in the Spanish-speaking enclaves across the United States where they shared screen time with Hollywood films. In movie theaters in Los Angeles, New York, San Antonio, and Denver these films solidified immigrant’s ties to their homelands, and reinforced audiences’ attachment to two film traditions: Hollywood and popular Latin American cinema. Before 1960 over 1,000 unique Spanish language films were shown in Los Angeles alone. (Gunckel, Horak, and Jarvinen 2019, 18) As this figure suggests, the United States became the Mexican film industry’s largest foreign market and profits from distribution in the US were key to the industry’s financial health. (Fein 1996) Los Angeles became a particularly important site for the exhibition of Latin American film in general and Mexican cinema in particular. Premieres, especially at the first run Teatro California, were sometimes attended by stars such as Tito Guizar and Carlos Mojica. (Gunckel 2015)

Even as Latin America’s major film producers became part of the cultural imaginary of Latino immigrants in the U.S, Hollywood continued to make films set in Latin American locales and featuring Latino performers. The **Good Neighbor policy**, a program designed to improve US-Latin American relations and draw Latin American countries into the United States’ sphere of influence used film as a key way to spread the message of hemispheric solidarity. (Woll 1974; Adams 2007) In collaboration with the federal government consultants were brought in to ensure that the industry’s representations of Latin Americans and Latin America were sympathetic, stars were briefly sent to Latin America as good will ambassadors, and studios were encouraged to make more films with Latin American characters and locations. The films produced included many musicals, which capitalized on the growing popularity of Latin music and provided opportunities for new talent such as Brazilian singer and dancer Carmen Miranda, and Mexican-born Ricardo Montalban. Among the notable films produced during this period is the Disney film *Los Tres Caballeros* (dir. Norman Ferguson, 1944) in which the Donald Duck visits various Latin American countries, a trip that is punctuated by catchy musical numbers and visuals, animated and live action, that by mobilizing what some scholars have referred to as a tourist or ethnographic gaze emphasized Latin America’s landscape and picturesque local traditions.

Another set of films made during this period and into the 1950s focused on Latinos and social issues. These films were part of a larger post-World War II film cycle that focused on social problems such as racism, assimilation, and inequality. Films that focused on Mexican Americans included *A Medal for Benny* (dir. Irving Pichel, 1945), *Border Incident* (dir. Anthony Mann, 1949) and *The Ring* (dir. Kurt Neumann 1952). Perhaps the most impactful social problem film that focused on Mexican American communities is *Salt of the Earth*, directed by Herbert J. Biberman who had been pushed out of Hollywood because of his political beliefs. The film featured a substantial number of non-professional actors and focused on the story of a successful real-life strike by Mexican American miners who wanted better working and living conditions. It is unusual in its positioning of Mexican Americans themselves as capable of producing change in their own life circumstances. Although technically not a social problem film, the Western drama *Giant* (dir. George Stevens, 1956), which had such a large impact on young Tino Villanueva, had elements of the social problem film as it highlighted discrimination and segregation in Texas.

<Fig. 9.4 here> *A collage of production stills from* Salt of the Earth *(dir. Biberman; Independent Productions Co., 1953) on the front of the film history collectible cards series Les Fiches de Monsieur Cinéma, which circulated in France. Collection of the author.*

For the first six decades of the 20th century Latino audiences, at home and abroad, faced the dilemma of being wooed by Hollywood as ticket buyers and fans, while simultaneously only seeing themselves on screen in stereotypical roles. Opportunities for Latino performers in the Hollywood film industry were limited, though there were notable exceptions such as the success of Navarro, Del Rio, and Vélez during the silent period. Performers whose careers began in the 1940s and 50s often found themselves forced to de-emphasize their Latino identity publicly even if they privately supported campaigns for social justice in Latino communities. Some like Rita Moreno who began her career in the 1950s had to fight being typecast.

Even as audiences eagerly participated in the fan culture that grew up around both Hollywood and eventually Latin American popular cinema, they were critical consumers of motion pictures. From the teens onward, the Spanish-language press served as an outlet for criticism of both onscreen representation and the offscreen discrimination that characterized Hollywood’s hiring practices. Though infrequent, immigrants wrote letters to their consulates noting the way that stereotypes affected their everyday lives. In the early 1920s these types of letters in combination with consular reports led the Mexican government to ban the products of certain US film companies. Concerned that Mexico’s stance would spill over into other Latin American markets, US film companies tried, sometimes halfheartedly, to ensure that their film would not offend Mexican viewers. (Serna 2014) What is more, the Spanish-language press regularly offered criticism of not only individual films but also the film industry and what the circulation of Spanish-language films made in Mexico, Argentina, or Cuba meant for Spanish-speaking audiences. Even as second and third generations thought of themselves as more American in the 1940s and 1950s, audiences comprised of long-term residents, more recent immigrants, and their children embraced alternatives to Hollywood’s representations of Latin Americans and Latinos, alternatives that celebrated the culture of their home countries and drew them into a community of movie goers that exceeded national borders. Some, like Tino Villanueva, sought to represent themselves. He did this through poetry, but others picked up cameras themselves.

*Laura Isabel Serna is associate professor of History and Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. She is the author of* Making Cinelandia: American Films and Mexican Film Culture before the Golden Age *(Duke University Press, 2014) and has published on issue of race and media in film in journals such as* Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies *and* Americas: A Journal of Cultural History*.*

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